

CONSERVATION DEPARTMENT

Fiscal Year 2007

The Conservation Department works collaboratively with citizens, Town departments and numerous State agencies to protect and enhance the natural environment in Amherst. FY 07 was another busy year for the Department and Commission. Complex wetlands cases, committee support, land management and land acquisition activities consumed thousands of hours of staff and volunteer time. Active collaboration with the Planning, Inspection Services, DPW, LSSE, Health and other departments was, yet again, an important component of the year as Amherst continues to struggle with limited budgets and a smaller workforce.

Wetlands

A brief review of the wetlands cases handled by staff this year reflects the growing trend in Amherst: issues are becoming more complex and contentious. Most of the dry, upland parcels of land have been developed, and what is left is wet and will be more difficult to permit. Wetland cases often result in litigation or, at the very least, long and difficult hearing processes. As always, our staff continues to work closely with homeowners, developers and the colleges to design projects that safeguard wetland resource areas throughout town. Intern Sarah Minick was a tremendous help to the Department and Conservation Commission this year while Stephanie Ciccarello was on maternity leave with daughter Bailey.

Land Management

The hiring of Land Manager Doug Hutcheson, in 2006, was certainly a highlight and provided momentum for the Department to move into FY 07. Land management staff and volunteers continued to work through a long list of deferred maintenance projects on the more than 2,000 acres of Amherst conservation land, including: trail improvements, bridge upgrades and new signs. Federal funding through the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) provided the Department with money to manage many acres of open field habitat for grassland birds and other uncommon wildlife. New management initiatives focused on the Eastern Box Turtle, a State-endangered species, were also put in motion.

During the year, staff also responded to hundreds of calls regarding downed trees, trail issues, wildlife problems and wetlands. Puffer's Pond and the community gardens also required significant support and time.

Land Preservation

Two significant land preservation projects moved forward in FY 07. After many months of negotiations and fundraising, the Smith project was finally completed, resulting in the conservation of more than 20 acres of land on the Mt. Holyoke Range. Thanks in large part to the Smith Family and collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, this high-priority project was finished. Town Meeting also approved funding for an APR on the Cows property in North Amherst off Meadow Street.

Administration

We were very fortunate to add Libby Lass to the Conservation Department team this year! Libby was formerly with the Town Manager's staff and brings many years of experience to her position as Management Assistant. Important new initiatives kicked off this year were supported by two very enthusiastic interns: Alicia Johnson assisted with the update to the Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan, while intern Martha Powers created a new website, focusing on farming in Amherst.

The Conservation Department is staffed by Libby Lass, Management Assistant; Stephanie Ciccarello, Wetlands Administrator; Doug Hutcheson, Land Manager; David McKinnon, Assistant Land Manager; and David Ziomek, Director of Conservation and Planning.

The Conservation Department provides direct and indirect support and assistance to the following committees:

1) Conservation Commission, 2) Agricultural Commission, 3) Public Shade Tree Committee, 4) Amherst Energy Task Force, 5) Public Transportation /Bicycling Committee 6) Planning Board, 7) Zoning Board of Appeals, 8) Norwottuck Rail Trail Advisory Committee, 9) Board of Health, 10) Leisure Services & Supplemental Education Committee.

David Ziomek